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ABSTRACT

Children's use of defenses to maintain or enhance self-esteem was investigated. Attention was given to four questions: Do children with different levels of self-esteem differ in (1) the frequency with which they employ defenses? (2) kinds of emotions they defend against? (3) the kinds of social situations which elicit their defensive responses? and (4) the extent to which they employ various defense mechanisms? Participants were 120 normally developing children 6 to 12 years old. Measures of defensiveness included a children's social desirability questionnaire and a semi-projective, emotional attribution task. Measures of self-esteem included a self-report measure: the Global Self-Worth Subscale of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children, and a projective measure: a story-telling task adapted from Cohen and Weil's "The Tasks of Emotional Development" (1975). A subject's responses to the emotional attribution task were considered defensive if the subject differed from sample means by one standard deviation or more. The children could use six defense mechanisms: denial, minimization, reaction formation, turning against the object, turning against the self, and identification with the aggressor. Results are discussed in terms of general themes and the defensive profiles that characterized the various self-esteem groups on each measure. (RH)

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CHILDREN'S USE OF DEFENSES AND SELF-ESTEEM MANAGEMENT

Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development: Kansas City, Missouri. April 1989.

The research I'm going to discuss this morning focuses on how children use defenses to maintain or enhance their self-esteem. Personality theorists from a variety of perspectives suggest that people are highly motivated to protect feelings of self-worth. Threats to self-esteem create anxiety. To cope with this anxiety, people defend. That is, they refuse to acknowledge their experience or certain aspects of it, or they distort the meaning of the event so that it is not as humilating or embarassing as it might have been.

While much has been written in the theoretical and clinical literature about the possible links between defense use and self-esteem, the exact nature of these relationships is unclear. For example, some theorists suggest that children with high self-esteem have no need to be defensive, whereas children with low self-esteem need to be very defensive in order to protect the feelings of self-worth they possess. Yet clinically we know this is not always the case. I have worked with many children with low self-esteem who I felt would do better if they were more

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defensive, and I have worked with children whose high self-esteem appeared more related to a defensive idealization of the self rather than to truly positive feelings of self-worth.

In the present study I attempted to explore some of the relationships between children's use of defenses and their self-esteem. The self-esteem classification system I used was based on patterns likely to reflect both adaptive self-perceptions and defensive self-perceptions. The study addressed the following questions:

1. Do children with different levels of self-esteem differ in the overall frequency with which they employ defenses?
2. Do children with different levels of self-esteem employ different defense mechanisms? For example, do children with low self-esteem use more TAS than children with high self-esteem?
3. Do children with different levels of self-esteem differ in the kinds of emotions they defend against? For example, are children with low self-esteem more likely to defend against feelings of anger and envy and less likely to defend against feelings of hurt?
4. Do children with different levels of self-esteem differ in the kinds of social situations which

elicit defensive responding? Research on social comparison suggests that children with low self-esteem may be highly defensive in social situations involving people with desirable personality traits.

The subjects for the study are described on page 1 of your handout. They were 120 normally-developing children, and ranged in age from 6 to 12 years.

I used two measures of defensiveness. One was a children's social desirability questionnaire adapted from Crandall, Crandall and Katkovsky (1965). Social desirability refers to an individual's tendency to respresent themselves in a manner that corresponds to society's view of the ideal person. Children are asked questions such as: "Do you ever tell a lie?", "Do you ever talk back to your parents?" Children who are highly defensive rigidly deny that they ever engage in any of these negative behaviors.

The second measure of defensiveness was a semi-projective, emotional attribution task. In this task the child were read stories depiciting familiar situations and were asked about the feelings a ficitous child named John or Mary might have toward the story character. Examples of the stories used are presented on pages 2 and 3 of your handout. After hearing each story the child was asked to

rate the intensity of 7 different emotions. The emotions queried are listed on your handout and included: anger, dislike/disgust, envy, fear, hurt, pity, and liking/respect. The same 7 emotions were queried in all stories, even though not all the emotions were appropriate to the situation. If a child responded "yes" to any of the questions, she was asked if Mary would feel that way a little, some, or a lot. Her responses were scored on a 4-point scale, with 0 being that Mary did not feel the emotion and 4 that she felt that way a lot. In this way, the means and standard deviations for children's attributions for each emotion in each story could be calculated. A child's response was considered defensive if it differed from the mean by one standard deviation or more. For example, if most children reported that Mary would feel envious, a child who did not attribute envy in that story was scored as using the defense of denial.

There were 6 different defense mechanisms the children could use. These were: denial, minimization, reaction formation, turning against the object, turning against the self, and identification with the aggressor. The criterion for scoring each defense is given in your handout.

In addition to examining the kinds of defense mechanisms the children employed, I also compared the

frequency with which they defended against the different emotions (e.g., anger, fear, envy and so on), and I examined the kinds of social situations that elicited defensive responses. The 5 story situations examined are listed on your handout (e.g., jealousy, positive personality traits), with an example from each category.

One concern you might have about this measure is that non-normative responses to the stories do not represent defensiveness, but simply reflect the child's lack of understanding of either the story situations or the emotions involved. I am fairly confident that this was not the case. Whenever a child gave what the interviewer thought was an unusual response, she asked the child to explain why Mary or John would feel that way. The children's responses suggested that they clearly understood the stories and the implications. One of my favorite explanations was given in response to a story which read "Mary always wanted a new bike. Her friend Lucy gets one and rides it in front of Mary". A 7 year old girl denied that Mary would feel envious of Lucy or angry at her, but said that Mary would feel a lot feel sorry for Lucy. When asked why Mary would feel sorry for Lucy, the child responded "because one day Lucy will be riding the bike in front of Mary and get run over by a truck".

I also used two measures of self-esteem. One was a self-report measure and one was a projective measure. I was interested in assessing the extent to which children's ratings on these measures would be correlated. Personality theory would suggest that the self-report measure would be subject to greater defensiveness than the projective measure and therefore we might expect little association between the two.

For the self-report measure I used the Global Self-worth Subscale of Harter's Perceived Competence Scale for Children (1982). On the basis of their Harter scores, I classified children into 3 groups. I used a self-esteem classification system similar to the one developed by Jude Cassidy (1988). Children who scored one SD below the mean for the sample were classified as children with "low self-esteem". Children who scored within one SD of the mean were classified as children with an "Integrated sense of self". Like Cassidy, I thought this would represent the most adaptive type of self-perception. That is, these children generally appeared to feel good about themselves, but also able acknowledge that they had some limitations. In contrast, children who reported perfect or near perfect self-esteem on the Harter (e.g., 25 or 26 out of 26) were classified as "Perfect". While it may be that these

children truly had high self-esteem, my suspicion was that these extreme scores might also represent a defensive idealization of the self. I expected these children would be the most defensive on both the CSDQ and the emotional attribution task. Age by gender breakdowns for the Harter are presented in Table 1 on page 4 of your handout. There were significant gender differences. More girls than boys were classified in the Low Self-esteem group, whereas more boys than girls had Perfect ratings.

The projective measure of self-esteem was a story-telling task adapted from the The Tasks of Emotional Development (Cohen & Wells, 1975). Children were presented with a picture of a same-sex child looking in the mirror. They were asked to tell a story about what the child in the picture was thinking and feeling. The stories were rated on a 5-point scale, with 1 indicating Negative Self-esteem and 5 Positive Self-esteem. Age by gender breakdowns are presented in Table 2 of your handout. There were significant age differences on this measure. Younger children were rated more positively than older children were.

Unlike the classification system used on the self-report measure, I had no predictions for what would constitute adaptive versus defensive self-perceptions on

the projective measure. However, I had assumed that this measure would be subject to less defensiveness and therefore higher ratings would be more adaptive. Because of the relatively small N's in the various self-esteem groups I was not able to examine age and gender differences in this part of the study. However, age and gender were used as covariates in all analyses.

I am going to summarize the results in terms of general themes, first discussing the associations between the two self-esteem measures. Then I'll describe the defensive profiles that characterized the various self-esteem groups on each measure.

The Pearson correlation for the two self-esteem measures was low ($r = .18$). However, it approached significance with a p value of less than .06. Initially I was interested in the discrepancies between the two measures--especially the defensive behaviors of children who scored Perfect on the Harter and in the Negative or Somewhat Negative categories on the projective measure. Unfortunately, perhaps because of the relatively small n's and high variability, these analyses revealed no significant findings. However, when I examined defensive behaviors of children who scored similarly on both measures, or when I looked at defensive behaviors in

relation to each self-esteem measure separately, there were significant results. Let me describe the defensive profiles which emerged.

First, if you look at Table 3 of your handout, you'll see that, in terms of overall defensiveness, children who were rated in the Perfect category on the Harter were significantly more defensive on the CSDQ than other children. However, there were no significant differences in overall defensiveness on the emotional attribution task. Table 4 presents the results for projective self-esteem ratings. Children in the Somewhat Positive category were significantly more defensive on the CSDQ than children in either the Ambivalent or Negative self-esteem groups. Children in the Somewhat Positive category were also more defensive on the emotional attribution task than children in the Ambivalent or Positive Self-esteem groups.

Let me digress for a moment and explain a little bit about the coding scheme used on the projective measure, and what the ratings "Somewhat Positive" and "Ambivalent" mean. Stories that were rated "Somewhat Positive" contained mostly positive affect and self-perceptions. However, some sense of tentativeness or caution was also included. Initially, I thought that this might be fairly adaptive. Similar to the Integrated category on the Harter, I felt it

might suggest an awareness of one's limitations. As you will see as I go through the results, this interpretation seems inaccurate. Children who told stories that were rated as reflecting Somewhat Positive Self-esteem appear to be children with a rather vulnerable sense of self. It is interesting to speculate that the sense of tentativeness or caution in their stories reflected a momentary lapse in their defenses and a glimpse at their true self-perception. In contrast, stories that contained almost equal amounts of positive and negative affects were rated as reflecting "Ambivalent" self-esteem. It was difficult to determine exactly how these children perceived themselves. In terms of corresponding defensive behaviors, the Ambivalent rating on the projective was the most similar to the Integrated category on the Harter.

Let me continue with the results. The 2nd question was whether children in the different self-esteem groups employed different defense mechanisms (e.g., TAS, TAO). Interestingly, the answer was "no". The means and SDs for percent use of each defense are displayed in Tables 5 and 6 of your handout. The only difference which approached significance was for minimization. Children who were rated as Positive or Ambivalent Self-esteem on the projective measure used less minimization than other

children. This suggests that they were more able than other children to tolerate intense affects.

The results for the analyses which examined differences in the emotions children defended against are presented in Tables 7 and 8. Children in the Low Self-esteem group on the Harter were significantly more likely than children in the Integrated and Perfect groups to deny or minimize feelings of liking or respect, and significantly less likely than children in the Integrated group to deny or minimize feelings of dislike or disgust. That is, children with low self-esteem tended to deny or minimize positive emotions than other children, and to express negative emotions more readily. If you look at Table 8, you'll see that on the projective measure, children in the Somewhat Positive Self-esteem category denied or minimized feelings of hurt significantly more often than children in the Negative or Positive Self-esteem groups. This finding further supports the interpretation that these children may be using defenses to protect a fragile sense of self-worth.

Third, I was interested in how children may differ in their use of reaction formation. Reaction formation involves the substitution of one emotion for anonther. On the emotional attribution task, children could use 3

different emotions to hide unacceptable feelings. These emotions were: liking/respect, dislike/disgust, or pity. It seemed to me that which of these emotions a child selected may be an important difference in defensive style.

As shown in Figures 1 and 2 on the last page of your handout, children who were rated in the Perfect category on the Harter and those rated in the Somewhat Positive category on the projective were significantly more likely than children in either the Low or Negative self-esteem categories to use liking/respect to cover emotions they could not admit. In contrast, children who were rated with Low Self-esteem on the Harter were more likely than other children to use feelings of dislike or disgust to hide feelings of vulnerability. I think that this is a very noteworthy finding. While children in the Somewhat Positive and Perfect categories appeared to employ defensive strategies aimed at maintaining social contact and reducing the possibility of rejection, children with low self-esteem appeared to employ defense strategies aimed at distancing themselves from others. Children with low self-esteem were more likely to deny positive emotions and less likely to deny negative feelings. They were also more likely to use feelings of dislike or disgust to mask feelings they could not acknoweldge.

While such strategies may have short-term gain, their repeated application may work more to erode self-esteem than to enhance it. Attempting to cover one's own vulnerabilities with feelings of dislike or contempt for others suggests that children with low self-esteem will only feel worse about themselves and, at the same time, undermine important social relationships which may promote self-worth. It is also interesting that children with low self-esteem were more defensive than other children in story situations involving protagonists with highly desirable personality traits, suggesting that social comparison process may be at work.

In summary, the results suggest three groups of children with fairly differentiated patterns of defense use and self-esteem management. Children who were rated as Perfect on the Harter or Somewhat Positive on the projective measure appeared to be children with "vulnerable" self-esteem. They tended to be the most defensive and employed a pattern of defenses aimed at gaining external approval and avoiding social rejection. While they appear to be coping well, one wonders what will happen if they become over stressed and their defense processes fail.

Children who scored in the Low and Negative self-esteem groups appeared to be children with truly low

feelings of self-worth. They employed defensive strategies that attempted to reduce their closeness or identification with others, and sought to maintain their self-worth by degrading others. The third group consisted of children who were rated as Integrated on the Harter and those who were rated as Ambivalent on the projective measure. Carl Rogers might describe these children as possessing few conditions of worth, with resulting positive self-regard.

In conclusion, the results of the present study revealed complex links between children's defensive behaviors and self-esteem management. While some children appeared to use defenses adaptively to maintain feelings of self-respect, other children employed defense strategies which might work more to their disadvantage than to their benefit. Gaining a better understanding of the processes involved and how these may develop will be important in advancing our understanding of children's emotional development. The study also offers a new, norm-based measure to assess children's defensive behaviors, and highlights the importance of considering qualitative differences in children's defensive styles. Finally, the study revealed the importance of using multiple measures of children's self-esteem. The measurement of self-esteem is inextricably linked to the presentation of self and, as such, is subject to defensiveness.

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CHILDREN'S USE OF DEFENSE AND SELF-ESTEEM MANAGEMENT

Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development; Kansas City, Missouri. April 1989.

SUBJECTS: 60 boys, 60 girls
younger group = 6 to 8 years, X = 7 1/2 years
older group = 10 to 12 years, X = 11 1/2 years

MEASURES:

Defensiveness:

1. Children's Social Desirability Questionnaire (Crandall, Crandall & Katovsky, 1965)

2. Semi-projective Emotional Attribution Task (Brody, Hay, & Vandewater, unpublished)

Self-esteem:

1. General Self-worth Subscale of the Perceived Competence Scale for Children (Harter, 1982)

2. Projective Story-telling Task from Tasks of Emotional Development (Cohen & Weil, 1975)

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Examples of Stories Used in the Emotional Attribution Task

Note: For female subjects the story characters were always female. For males they were male.

1. Jealousy

Sally/Danny always gets lots of money to buy candy bars and sodas and Mary/John never does.

Would Mary/John feel mad at Sally/Danny?
Would Mary/John feel that Sally/Danny is a yukky or disgusting kid?
Would Mary/John wish that s/he could be more like Sally/Danny because Mary/John doesn't get enough money to buy candy and sodas?
Would Mary/John be scared of Sally/Danny?
Would Mary/John's feelings be hurt by Sally/Danny?
Would Mary/John feel sorry for Sally/Danny?
Would Mary/John like Sally/Danny and feel that Sally/Danny is a good person?

Normative Attributions: envy (some/a lot)
like (a little/some)
hurt (a little/some)
anger (none/a little)
disgust (none/a little)

Defensive Responses:
denial: no attributions
TAS: hurt (a lot) no anger
TAO: anger (a lot) no hurt
reaction formation: pity (a little/some/a lot)
warmth/liking (a lot)
minimization: envy (a little)
identification with aggressor: N/A

2. Positive Personality Traits

Theresa's/Larry's friend asks for help on homework. Even though Theresa/Larry is very busy, s/he takes time out to explain the homework to her/his friend.

Normative Attributions: envy (some/a lot)
warmth/liking (some/a lot)

Defensive Responses:
denial: no attributions
TAS: hurt (a lot) no anger
TAO: anger (a lot) no hurt
reaction formation: pity (a little/some/a lot)
disgust (little/some/a lot)
minimization: envy (a little)
warmth/liking (a little)

2

identification with aggressor: N/A

3. Social Transgressions:

Mary/John is at a birthday party. Linda/Billy spills her/his drink all over Mary/John's cake on purpose and for no reason.

Normative Attributions: hurt (a little/some/a lot)
anger (some/a lot)
disgust (a little/some/a lot)

Defensive Responses: denial: no attributions
TAS: hurt (a lot) no anger
TAO: N/A
reaction formation: pity (little/some/a lot)
liking (little/some/a lot)
minimization: anger (a little)
identification with aggressor: envy (a little/some/a lot)

4. Fear:

Mary/John is walking home from school, and s/he is going a new way that s/he's never gone before. S/he notices that a girl/boy s/he doesn't know is following her/him as s/he walks.

Normative Attributions: fear (some/a lot)
anger (a little/some)
disgust (a little/some)
hurt (none/a little)

Defensive Responses: denial: no attributions
TAS: hurt (a lot) no anger
TAO: anger (a lot) no hurt
reaction formation: pity (little/some/a lot)
liking (a little/some/a lot)
minimization: fear (a little)
identification with aggressor: envy (a little/some/a lot)

5. Negative Personality Traits

Cindy/Peter is a bully and likes to boss other children around and tell them what to do. Here, s/he is telling all the other children that s/he wants them to play her/his game. S/he doesn't want to play a game that s/he hasn't picked out.

Normative Attributions: hurt (a little/some)
fear (a little/some)
anger (some/a lot)
disgust (some/a lot)

Defensive Responses: denial: no attributions
TAS: hurt (a lot) no anger
TAO: N/A
reaction formation: pity (little/some/a lot)
liking (little/some/a lot)
minimization: anger (a little)
disgust (a little)
identification with aggressor: envy (little/some/a lot)

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Table 1

SELF-ESTEEM RATINGS ON SELF-REPORT MEASURE (Harter)

	Young Girls	Young Boys	Older Girls	Older Boys	Total
LOW SELF-ESTEEM	n = 7	n = 6	n = 8	n = 2	19 % (n = 23)
INTEGRATED	n = 18	n = 10	n = 17	n = 18	53 % (n = 63)
PERFECT	n = 5	n = 14	n = 5	n = 10	28 % (n = 34)

Table 2

SELF-ESTEEM RATINGS ON PROJECTIVE MEASURE

	Young Girls	Young Boys	Older Girls	Older Boys	Total
NEGATIVE	n = 5	n = 3	n = 5	n = 7	17 % (n = 20)
SOMEWHAT NEGATIVE	n = 8	n = 9	n = 15	n = 11	36 % (n = 43)
AMBIVALANT	n = 4	n = 7	n = 6	n = 8	21 % (n = 25)
SOMEWHAT POSITIVE	n = 9	n = 6	n = 3	n = 3	18 % (n = 21)
POSITIVE	n = 4	n = 4	n = 0	n = 1	8 % (n = 9)

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Table 3

Mean Defensiveness (SDs) on Children's Social Desirability Questionnaire (CSDQ) and the Emotional Attribution Task by Harter Self-Esteem Category

Measure of Defensiveness	Harter Self-Esteem Category: Perfect (n=33)	Integrated (n=63)	Low Self-esteem (n=23)
Mean CSDQ score	14.2 * (5.4)	9.4 (4.3)	8.3 (4.6)
Emotional Attribution Task Percent Defensiveness	17.6% (8.5%)	17.8% (7.4%)	19.3% (9.0%)

Table 4

Mean Defensiveness (SDs) on Children's Social Desirability Questionnaire (CSDQ) and the Emotional Attribution Task by Projective Self-esteem Category

Measure of Defensiveness	Projective Self-esteem Category: Positive (n=9)	Somewhat Positive (n=21)	Ambivalant (n=25)	Somewhat Negative (n=43)	Negative (n=19)
Mean CSDQ Score	11.9 (5.7)	14.2 (5.5)	9.2 * (4.5)	10.2 (4.5)	8.8 * (5.6)
Emotional Attribution Task Percent Defensiveness	13.9 % * (6.1%)	22.0 % (9.1%)	15.5 % * (6.6%)	18.5 % (8.1%)	17.8 % (7.8%)

* p's < .05

Note: Total possible score on CSDQ was 26. X = 10.55 (sd=5.22)

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Table 5

Means (SD) for Percent Use of Each Defense Mechanism by Harter Self-esteem Category

	Harter Self-esteem Category		
Defense Strategy	Low Self-esteem	Integrated	Perfect
Denial	14.02% (12.36%)	14.35% (8.22%)	15.52% (13.58%)
Reaction Formation	12.37% (10.0 %)	10.76% (7.87%)	11.11% (7.01%)
Minimization	19.56% (19.95%)	14.84% (12.90%)	12.82% (14.15%)
TAO	3.77% (5.25%)	3.81% (7.06%)	2.83% (5.28%)
TAS	5.38% (5.62%)	5.52% (6.47%)	4.62% (5.12%)
Identification with Aggressor	0.48% (2.32%)	3.18% (6.13%)	2.69% (5.58%)

Table 6

Means (SD) for Percent Use of Each Defense Mechanism by Projective Self-esteem Category

Defense Strategy	Negative	Somewhat Negative	Ambivalent	Somewhat Positive	Positive
Denial	13.53% (9.60%)	14.05% (11.03%)	14.37% (9.32%)	18.56% (13.19%)	11.11% (9.19%)
Reaction Formation	11.70% (6.90%)	10.70% (8.49%)	10.40 (9.22%)	12.28% (8.03%)	11.11% (5.33%)
Minimization	15.39% (15.96%)	17.98% (16.38%)	9.54% (10.42%)	19.78% (18.05%)	6.84% (8.12%)
TAO	3.51% (4.65%)	4.03% (8.38%)	2.67% (5.09%)	2.86% (3.98%)	3.70% (4.84%)
TAS	5.76% (5.85%)	5.87% (5.77%)	2.86% (4.12%)	6.80% (7.91%)	4.76% (5.32%)
Identification with Aggressor	1.75% (4.16%)	2.07% (5.56%)	3.11% (6.02%)	3.70% (6.41%)	1.23% (3.70%)

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Table 7

Mean Percent (SDs) Use of Denial or Minimization for Each Emotion by Harter Self-esteem Group

Emotion	Low Self-esteem	Integrated	Perfect
Envy	15.53 % (14.45 %)	10.27 % (11.48 %)	12.12 % (12.09 %)
Liking/ Respect	9.75 % * (7.47 %)	5.97 % (6.38 %)	4.18 % (5.70 %)
Hurt	19.81 % (18.03 %)	19.58 % (17.48 %)	22.78 % (21.78 %)
Fear	19.26 % (18.58 %)	19.50 % (19.92 %)	23.38 % (21.67 %)
Anger	12.0 % (13.25 %)	10.85 % (10.33 %)	12.12 % (12.69 %)
Dislike/ disgust	14.49 % ** (22.08 %)	28.57 % (25.22 %)	22.90 % (26.64 %)

Table 8

Mean Percent (SDs) Use of Denial or Minimization for Each Emotion by Projective Self-esteem Group

Emotion	Negative	Somewhat Negative	Ambivalent	Somewhat Positive	Positive
Envy	12.28 % (15.25 %)	13.73 % (11.39 %)	8.19 % (9.48 %)	13.83 % (14.82 %)	7.41 % (9.85 %)
Liking/ Respect	8.17 % (6.12 %)	7.30 % (6.78 %)	3.86 % (6.40 %)	6.57 % (7.55 %)	2.38 % (3.77 %)
Hurt	13.45 % * (10.85 %)	19.09 % (16.09 %)	21.33 % (19.22 %)	32.80 % (24.46 %)	9.88 % * (10.31 %)
Fear	16.54 % (17.34 %)	19.93 % (19.99 %)	17.71 % (17.63 %)	30.61 % (23.60 %)	15.87 % (21.95 %)
Anger	9.65 % (7.98 %)	11.43 % (11.65 %)	11.00 % (10.68 %)	16.67 % (14.91 %)	4.63 % (7.35 %)
Dislike/ disgust	23.98 % (29.69 %)	24.03 % (24.84 %)	24.44 % (23.13 %)	25.93 % (24.93 %)	25.93 % (32.39 %)

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Figure 1

Use of Reaction Formation by Self-reported Self-esteem (Harter)

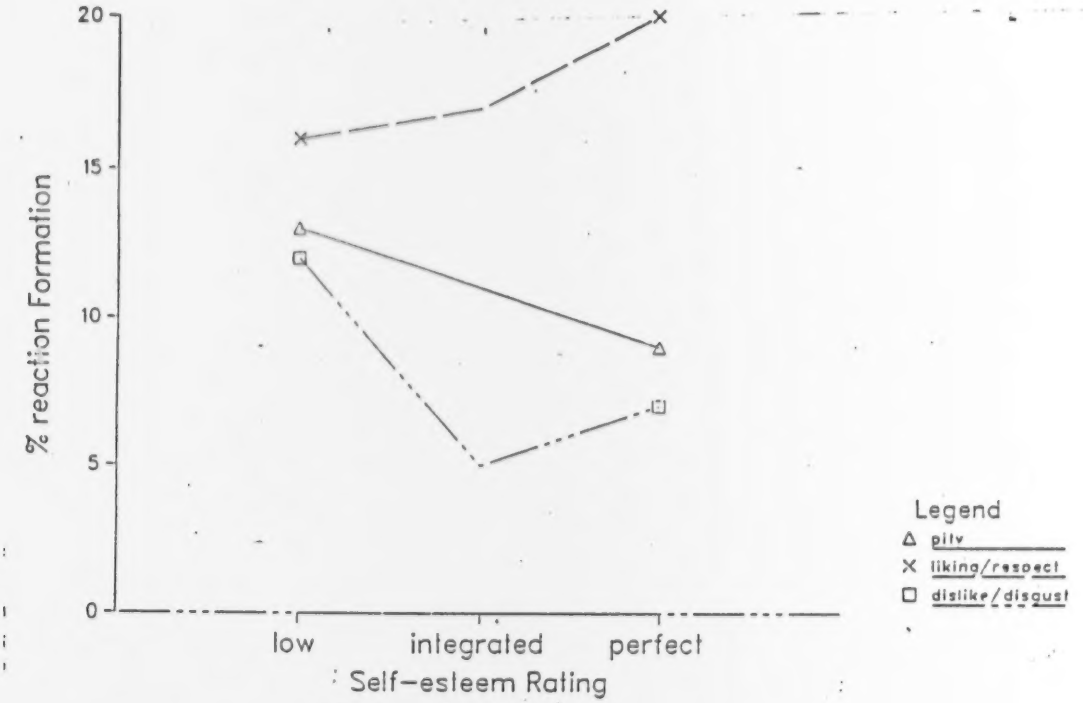

Figure 2

Use of Reaction Formation by Projective Self-esteem